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Carol Channing Dies at 97; a Larger-Than-Life Broadway Star

Her performances as the gold-digging Lorelei Lee in “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes” and the matchmaker Dolly Gallagher Levi in “Hello, Dolly!” made her a Broadway legend.

By Enid Nemy

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Carol Channing, whose incandescent performances as the gold-digging Lorelei Lee in “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes” and the matchmaker Dolly Gallagher Levi in “Hello, Dolly!” made her a Broadway legend, died early Tuesday at her home in Rancho Mirage, Calif. She was 97.

Her death was confirmed by her publicist, B. Harlan Boll, who said she had two strokes in the past year.

Ms. Channing was bringing audiences to their feet night after night in a revival of “Hello, Dolly!” when she was 74, singing, “Wow, wow, wow, fellas, / Look at the old girl now, fellas,” resplendent in her scarlet gown and jewels, her platinum hair crowned with red plumage.

Ten years later she was still getting applause, this time for a cabaret act. Nine years after that, just a few days before her 93rd birthday, she appeared at Town Hall in Manhattan as part of a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the night “Dolly” opened.

“Performing is the only excuse for my existence,” she said during her last Broadway appearance, in the 1995 revival of “Hello, Dolly!” “What can be better than this?”

Ms. Channing was one of the most recognizable presences in the theater world. Her tousled hairdo, headlight-size eyes and exaggerated mouth were the subject of countless caricatures. For many years her real hair, damaged by bleaching, was covered by a wig.

Her false eyelashes, worn at a fantastic length since she was a teenager, posed a more serious problem. The glue that was used to attach them gradually pulled out her natural lashes, and Ms. Channing began painting on the long spikes.

By then her vision had become impaired, but she was philosophical about her somewhat hazy view of her fellow actors. “I know what they look like,” she said.



Ms. Channing with fellow Tony Award winners in 1964 for best performances, after presentations at the New York Hilton. From left, Alec Guinness, male dramatic star; Sandy Dennis, female dramatic star, and Bert Lahr, musical star. Ms. Channing also won for musical star, for "Hello, Dolly!" Larry C. Morris/The New York Times

The generous mouth was put to amazing use in "Hello, Dolly!" In one scene she shoveled into it, with assembly-line speed, one potato puff after another. The stage puffs, made from Kleenex and tinted with powdered Sanka, were spit out into a napkin when the audience's attention was directed elsewhere. As Ms. Channing told the story, her mouth held 22 puffs with ease, and 27 with no great difficulty; her standby could manage only three.

Ms. Channing's voice, gravel-toned and capable of sinking to subterranean levels, was as distinctive as her appearance. When she sang a song in her exaggerated growl, it belonged to her forever; only Louis Armstrong's own growling rendition of "Hello, Dolly!" was a match for hers.

Her speech in public, described as everything from a "raspy yawp" to a foghorn, was deceptive, friends said: When alone with them, she was perfectly capable of less stylized enunciation and enjoyed serious conversation.

The critic Walter Kerr called her "maybe the only creature extant who can live up to a Hirschfeld," explaining that the theatrical caricaturist Al Hirschfeld "always lives up to the people he draws, but the people he draws don't always live up to him." Mr. Kerr added, "Here's the exception: mascara to swim in, nobly tragic mouth, the face of a great mystic about to make a terrible mistake."

'A Nova Explodes'

The tall, flamboyant Ms. Channing became a Broadway star at the Ziegfeld Theater on Dec. 8, 1949. That was the opening night of "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," a musical based on Anita Loos's best seller of the 1920s, with music by Jule Styne, lyrics by Leo Robin and choreography by Agnes de Mille. Ms. Channing starred as the flapper Lorelei Lee, and her stardom was assured when she sang Lorelei's anthem, "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend":

Time rolls on

And youth is gone

And you can't straighten up when

you bend.

But stiff back or stiff knees,

You stand straight at Tiff'ny's,

Diamonds are a girl's best friend.

Time magazine summed up her performance: "Perhaps once in a decade a nova explodes above the Great White Way with enough brilliance to reillumine the whole gaudy legend of show business." Brooks Atkinson, the drama critic of The New York Times, hailed her Lorelei Lee as "the most fabulous comic creation of this dreary period in history."

The show ran almost two years on Broadway, and Ms. Channing played Lorelei on tour for another year.



Ms. Channing with Howard Morris, left, and Bob Neukum in “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.” When that show opened on Broadway in 1949, Ms. Channing’s performance as the flapper Lorelei Lee made her a star. Photofest

In the next decade, she appeared on Broadway in “Wonderful Town,” “The Vamp” and “Show Girl.” She also created a nightclub act that toured the country.

The producer David Merrick, who had acquired the Broadway rights to Thornton Wilder’s play “The Matchmaker” and was in the process of turning it into the musical “Hello, Dolly!,” caught Ms. Channing’s act in Minneapolis and discussed the role of Dolly Gallagher Levi with her. She later met with Gower Champion, who had been enlisted as director and choreographer — and who, with his wife, Marge, had played an important role in Ms. Channing’s early career — and the role was hers.

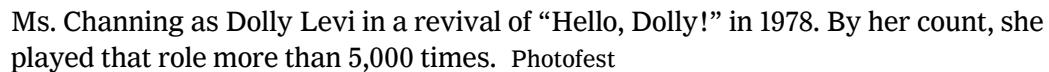
“Hello, Dolly!,” with a score by Jerry Herman, opened at the St. James Theater on Jan. 16, 1964, and received ecstatic reviews. It went on to win 10 Tony Awards, including one for Ms. Channing as best actress in a musical.

That same year she sang a rewritten, politically partisan version of the title song, called “Hello, Lyndon!,” which President Lyndon B. Johnson, running for a full four-year term, played at campaign stops. She went on to perform the song, accompanied by Mr. Herman on the piano, in a show staged during the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Ms. Channing and the Johnson family became close friends, and there was some speculation years later that that relationship had landed her on President Richard M. Nixon’s infamous enemies list, a source of pride for her.

Among those Ms. Channing beat out for the Tony was Barbra Streisand, who was nominated for “Funny Girl.” To her disappointment, however, it was Ms. Streisand who was chosen to star in the 1969 film version of “Hello, Dolly!,” which meant that both of Ms. Channing’s signature roles ended up being played onscreen by other actresses: Marilyn Monroe had played Lorelei Lee in the 1953 movie of “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.”

Ms. Channing’s own motion picture career never really took off, although she received an Academy Award nomination and won a Golden Globe for her performance in “Thoroughly Modern Millie” (1967). She did enjoy some success on television, and in her later years she did a lot of cartoon voice-over work. But the theater was her natural home.

“Hello, Dolly!” ran for almost seven years on Broadway. Ginger Rogers assumed the title role when Ms. Channing left to take the show on the road in the summer of 1965, and Pearl Bailey, Ethel Merman and other marquee names later played it as well. (Bette Midler and Bernadette Peters starred in a hit Broadway revival that began in 2017.) But ultimately the part belonged to Ms. Channing, who toured with revivals in 1977, 1982 and 1994.



Ms. Channing as Dolly Levi in a revival of “Hello, Dolly!” in 1978. By her count, she played that role more than 5,000 times. Photofest

Dolly x 4,500

By the time she returned to the role on Broadway in October 1995, Ms. Channing had played Dolly more than 4,500 times, missing only one performance — in June of that year, when she left the show for a day to fly to New York from San Diego to accept a Tony Award for lifetime achievement. She had appeared onstage in a cast, a neck brace and a wheelchair, and with viruses that would have felled anyone with lesser determination. (By her own count, she went on to surpass the 5,000 mark.)

She toured 30 cities with that production before opening on Broadway, where “Dolly” played to packed houses for 15 weeks before moving on to Britain, Australia, Japan and China.

Between the “Dolly” revivals, Ms. Channing starred in tours of “Jerry’s Girls,” a musical revue built around Mr. Herman’s songs, and, with Mary Martin, in the James Kirkwood comedy “Legends.” In 1974 she appeared on Broadway in “Lorelei,” a revised version of “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.”

Carol Elaine Channing was born in Seattle on Jan. 31, 1921, and grew up in San Francisco, the only child of George and Adelaide (Glaser) Channing. She later recalled that she was both frightened and embarrassed by her mother, a woman of wildly varying moods who kept her from having friends and lied to her teachers about her. But Carol adored her father, a newspaperman turned Christian Science lecturer.

In her 2002 autobiography, “Just Lucky I Guess,” Ms. Channing revealed that when she was 16 her mother told her that her father was part black; she kept her racial heritage a secret, she wrote, for fear that it would be bad for her career.

She discovered early that she had a talent to entertain. At the age of 7 she ran for secretary of her class, and when she couldn’t think of a good reason to ask her classmates to vote for her, she began doing imitations of her teachers rather than making a speech. She was hooked from the moment she heard the first wave of laughter. She also won the election.

She studied drama and dance at Bennington College in Vermont. During the summer of 1940 she worked briefly at the Tamiment Playhouse, the famed incubator of talent in the Poconos, but failed to make much of an impression on Max Liebman, the playhouse's director. (He was later the creator of "Your Show of Shows," the TV show that made Sid Caesar a star.)

Ms. Channing in a cabaret performance at Feinstein's at the Regency in New York in 2005. In a review, Stephen Holden of The Times wrote, "At 84, she personifies the adult child as natural show-off and clown, brimming with curiosity and humor, accentuating the positive." Richard Termine for The New York Times

The next winter, during a recess at Bennington, she went to New York to try her luck and was cast in Marc Blitzstein's opera "No for an Answer." The show folded after three days, but Ms. Channing, encouraged by the one line of praise she received in The New Yorker, decided to seek work on Broadway.

In October 1941 she became an understudy to Eve Arden in the Cole Porter musical "Let's Face It," but the next year, after having replaced Ms. Arden only once, she accepted a pay cut to \$50 a week from \$65 to appear in a play about nurses on Bataan, "Proof Thro' the Night." It lasted a week.

After sporadic work in nightclubs and at Catskills resorts, she returned to San Francisco at her father's insistence in 1946. The next year she persuaded him to give her one last crack at the theater. She ventured to Los Angeles, where she did one-nighters and benefits before obtaining an

audition with Marge Champion, who was looking for new faces for “Lend an Ear,” a satirical revue for which Ms. Champion’s husband staged the musical numbers.

“She certainly was awkward and odd-looking,” Ms. Champion remembered years later, “but her warmth and her wholesomeness came through to me.”

With Ms. Channing in the cast, “Lend an Ear” played for five months in Los Angeles before opening on Broadway in December 1948. It ran for just over a year, and Anita Loos and the producers Herman Levin and Oliver Smith remembered Ms. Channing’s performance when they set out to cast Lorelei Lee in “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.”

Age Is but a Number

Ms. Channing maintained that “we have no such thing as age.” She said she did not observe her birthday until Jan. 31, 1993, her 72nd, when she was a guest at a White House dinner and, to her amazement, President Bill Clinton noted the occasion in his remarks. When she replied that she had never celebrated her birthday, the president responded, “Well, then this is your first birthday.”

She did, however, resent the change in attitude prompted by advancing years. “I sometimes get the strangest treatment from people,” she told The Times in 1995. “They try to force you to be what they think you are. They think you’re somebody you’re not. They start worrying about you and looking at you differently and helping you across the street.”

Ms. Channing in the 2012 documentary "Carol Channing: Larger Than Life," directed by Dori Berinstein. Peter James Zielinski, via Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS

She was then in her mid-70s but believed, she said, that she had not yet peaked. "Shirley Temple peaked at 7," she said. "I haven't gotten myself together yet."

She remained active well into her 80s. Reviewing her performance at Feinstein's at the Regency in 2005, Stephen Holden of The Times wrote: "Although substantially diminished in power, Ms. Channing's blend of unbridled optimism and ferocious vitality is still a primal show business force field. At 84, she personifies the adult child as natural show-off and clown, brimming with curiosity and humor, accentuating the positive."

In 2012 Ms. Channing was the subject of a documentary, "Carol Channing: Larger Than Life," directed by Dori Berinstein.

Her first two marriages, to Theodore Naidish, a writer, and Alex Carson, a professional football player in Canada, ended in divorce. She had a son, Channing, by her second husband; he was later adopted by her third husband, the television producer Charles Lowe, and as Chan Lowe her son was for many years the editorial cartoonist for The Sun-Sentinel in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Ms. Channing and Mr. Lowe were married in 1956 and were for many years a partnership, with Mr. Lowe negotiating Ms. Channing's contracts and dealing with every detail of her career.

That partnership unraveled in 1998, when they separated after she had accused him of mismanagement. They were estranged at the time of Mr. Lowe's death in 1999. In 2003 Ms. Channing married Harry Kullijian, who had been her junior high school sweetheart. He died in December 2011. She is survived by her son.

Ms. Channing's reputation as a highly individual personality was enhanced by her food habits. For many years she carried organically grown food in silver containers to restaurants, dinner parties and even the White House. The food was prepared with bottled water because, she said, she was allergic to something in tap water. It turned out that her food allergies were traceable to the hair dye she used. When she stopped dyeing her hair and began to wear wigs offstage as well as on, the sensitivity to tap water eased.

Ms. Channing once said that she hoped to die like David Burns, her original co-star in "Hello, Dolly!," who got a big laugh in 1971 in a tryout of the musical "70 Girls 70" in Philadelphia and then keeled over onstage while the laugh continued.

"The audience didn't know there was anything wrong, you see," she said. "He died hearing the laugh build. I can't think of a better way to go."

Correction: January 16, 2019

A picture caption with an earlier version of this obituary, using information from the photo agency Photofest, misstated when the photograph of Ms. Channing as Dolly Levi in “Hello, Dolly!” was taken. It was in 1978, when she returned to the role in a Broadway revival — not during the show’s original Broadway run.

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 16, 2019, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Carol Channing, ‘Dolly’ Whose Smile Lit Up Broadway, Dies at 97

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